DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 422 091 PS 026 769

AUTHOR Firlik, Russell
TITLE Smaller Places for Special People?
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Childhood Attitudes; Educational Environment; *Educational Facilities; Educational Facilities Design; Elementary Education; Elementary School Curriculum; Elementary School Students; *Hidden Curriculum; *Playgrounds; Recreational Facilities; School Construction; *School Expansion
IDENTIFIERS *Playground Design; Playground Equipment

ABSTRACT

As school enrollments increase, schools will need to expand their facilities and playgrounds. School construction and expansion is a part of the "hidden curriculum" of schools and affects children's learning processes. When school expansion is combined with the move from half day to full day kindergarten and increasing the time children spend at school, outdoor space for free play is reduced. Results of a British research study called "Special Places: Special People--The Hidden Curriculum of School Grounds" showed the importance of external environments for shaping children's learning and values. Findings included children's preference for natural environments over built environments and manufactured equipment, and the discrepancy between children's and adults' attitudes toward the value of external environments. American educators and administrators would do well to consider the extent to which children have freedom of access to external environments and to control this "hidden curriculum" for the benefit of the students. (JPB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 422 091

Smaller Places for Special People?

Russell Firlik

School construction and expansion is becoming a reality in all regions of the United States. It has been reported that about 5,200 more schools will be needed to accommodate increasing enrollments by the 2001-2 school year. Furthermore, school districts will spend about $14 billion in new construction and $17 billion in modernization and additions over the next three years (Firlik, 1997). With this influx of new construction and expansion of school facilities, there will also be a concomitant increase in construction and expansion of the school grounds, if general, and, school playgrounds in particular. Are we aware of the effects on the children's school day resulting from this rapidly changing landscape?

This article is intended to awaken school authorities, board of education committees, architects, practitioners, parents, and community members to the notion that school construction and expansion has an important message regarding the "hidden curriculum" within the school grounds and play grounds for children. This work began a couple of years ago when I was a Fulbright Administration Exchange in England. About that time in England, a two year research study called Special places: Special people- The hidden curriculum of school grounds (Titman 1994), had been completed. This study was a collaboration between the World Wide Fund, an international environmental organization, and Learning through

PS 026769

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Russell Firlik
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Landscapes, the United Kingdom charity concerned about school grounds. The impact of the study was being discussed in every educational arena throughout England at that time.

There appears to be some valuable lessons to be considered by American educators in reviewing this two year research study and reflecting on its outcomes and recommendations. With this motive in mind, I shall highlight the results of the Special Places; Special People research study and, utilizing their findings, demonstrate the important relationships between construction and expansion of school facilities, and children's behavior, attitudes about school, and sense of being. Moreover, once these relationships have been determined, the question remains, with the increase in school construction and building expansion, what are the significant factors that we must be aware of and plan for in our school grounds and play ground designs? The possible reduction of outdoor school space and limitations to school playscapes are important to recognize and consider. We must remind ourselves that with new school construction and expansion, the movement from half day to full day kindergarten, and increasing time children spend at school, we may also experience space contractions in children's out door learning.

The objectives of Special places; Special people

This research was designed to respond to the fundamental question: does the physical environment of school grounds and the way they are managed affect children's behavior, attitudes and if so, why and how? A sub element of the original question was can we determine what sort of places children value and why (Titman 2)? England has a history of using their out door environment for a wide range of teaching and learning opportunities. This contemporary history dates back many generations. As Tiny Bruce notes : "It is interesting to note that for Frobel, McMillan and Isaacs, it was the child's free play in the garden (play ground) which led to their greatest contributions to the early childhood educational curriculum" (Titman 4). Moreover, Edith Cobb reviewed 300 autobiographical recollections of childhood of famous people and claimed a correlation exists between the development of creativity and ecological experience in childhood (Titman 6).

Summary of the results of Special Places-Special People

The following is a summary of the study's conclusion to the research question: Does the physical environment of school grounds and the way they are managed affect children's behaviors, attitudes and if so, why and how?

- Children valued the external environment on a variety of

levels: They valued natural, external environments for its greenness, and expressed strong, positive reactions to natural areas which they judged as peaceful, symbolizing good, and pollution-free environments (Titman 27).

• Children preferred natural environments to built environments- manufactured equipment (Titman 27).

• Children read external environments as places which promised to meet a range of needs which they felt to be important. For example, children always associated adventure, challenge, and risk with being outdoors. Children expressed clear preferences for those areas that were not designed for them, where they were relatively free to claim ownership (Titman 29).

• External environments and elements of them were judged according to the way they looked and made children feel. The look of the external environment was anesthetically important to children. Children reacted strongly to elements associated with sensory stimulus such as natural color. For example, they "hate concrete because it's boring but flowers made them feel cheerful" (Titman 29).

• Children were very critical of the attitudes and actions of adults in relation to the external environment in general. Children were very conscious of the difference between places that were valued by adults and those that were not. They were critical of adults for lack of care for the playground environments (Titman 29).

• Access to preferred external environments varied considerably according to where children lived. Generally, children in rural areas have far greater freedom and independent mobility than those living in urban areas (Titman 29).

Lost in this "fight for space" is the reality that as we lengthen the school day and expand into full day kindergartens, we could conceivably have less natural space for children as they spend more time at school.

Revisiting the original research question " Does the design of school grounds and the way these are managed influence children's behaviors, attitudes, and if so, why and how? The findings from this two-year English study strongly suggests that answer to these questions is "YES!" This response from children should be viewed with cautious optimism to all people concerned about the impact of new construction and expansion of school facilities, certainly at the elementary school level.

The research also states that there is a hidden curriculum of school grounds and playscapes that send many messages and symbolic meaning that make statements to children. This hidden curriculum seemed to have a considerable influence on what children value and why. The major findings offered many opportunities for American educators, administrators and board of education members to reflect, problem solve, and plan before construction and expansion

takes more space away. Some of the the messages encoded from children's perspectives were:

I. School grounds mattered to children (Titman 56).

(a) They satisfy a range of needs from being alone to social play.

(b) They were dedicated to children's use, not adults.

(c) They felt that school grounds were one type of environment to which all children have access.

II. School grounds were a part of school to children (Titman 57).

(a) Children view their school- the grounds and the building as an entity, an important part of the school culture.

(b) From the viewpoint of children, the grounds were symbolic of a place, carefully selected for them, in order to play and that formed a substantial part of being part of school.

III. The school grounds "belonged" to the school and those who managed the school were responsible for the grounds. Lack of care and responsibility of the grounds were seen as an adult responsibility (Titman 57).

IV. Children looked for the following from their school grounds (Titman 58).

(a) A place for doing (hands-on)

(b) A place for thinking (minds-on)

(c) A place for feeling- color, beauty, and interest

(d) A place for being themselves

V. What children say about their outside environment (Titman 59).

(a) A natural landscape with trees, flowers and other growing things.

(b) Surfaces which they can use which won't hurt.

(c) Places where we can find shelter, shade, things to set on, go under, climb on top, and lean against.

(d) If the playgrounds are safe and cared for we know that adults like us and care about our space.

VI. School grounds reflect the ethos of the school (Titman 60).

(a) Concern for environmental circumstances.

(b) Grounds should be a nice, safe , secure places to be.

American Educators: The Value of Using Common Sense

The conclusions from the English study should provide caring and thinking educators to consciously design open spaces for children. For example,

(1) School ground, by their design, their allocated space, and by the way they are managed, convey strong messages and meaning to children which influences their what they value, their behavior in and attitude about school. Therefore, any less space created during expansion and/construction of new buildings, will have a direct impact on children and their school lives.

(2) Children decode these messages and encode their meanings from a range of perspectives. As an administrator, I can attest that this hidden or informal curriculum has considerable influence on the operation of schools.

(3) It is within the power of those who manage and lead schools, to determine the nature of the hidden curriculum and deduce from it the potential impact on children.

Implications for American Educators and Administrators

"Children move from setting to setting and it is likely that their experience in the environment will influence their behavior in another" (Weinstein & David 137).

The extent to which children have freedom of access to external environments is decreasing and is not the same as it was two decades ago. At a lecture on playscapes and outdoor education at Leicester University (1995), I learned that in Britain, in 1980, 80% of 7 to 8 year olds walked to school. In 1991, 9% walked to school. This could be perceived as a loss of independence of mobility with adults escorting or driving children to and from school. I have experienced this same phenomenon at my present suburban "neighborhood" school over the past decade. In and of itself, this is not a bad situation, it just indicates a change in children's life style; another example of children

not changing, but how childhood has.

With the decrease in quality, natural space for children to romp safely, this might give rise to children settling for passive activities while out of doors. Lack of choice has always been a major factor in increased television watching. Fitness is directly related to physical activity. The essential question is: Are we providing the appropriate attitude to promote physical fitness? Do we care? Of course we do.

I suspect that with the increase in families with two parents working, single parent families, and decreasing extended family arrangements children's availability for social interaction and social competence skill building will be somewhat decreased if external space is eroded by expansion and new construction taking over previous accessible playground space.

After all is said and done, let's hope that we do more than we say with respect to our concern for and control of appropriate external environments for children. SPECIAL PLACES; SPECIAL PEOPLE should be our mantra to increasing, not decreasing, outdoor space for children.

Bibliography

Firlik, R. 1997. "Designing New Schools: The Race for Space." Principal 76 (4) 38-41.

Titman, W. 1994. Special Places; Special People: The hidden curriculum of school grounds. World Wide Fund- UK, Panda House, Weyside Park, Godalmaning, Surrey, England.

Titman, W. "Playscapes and Outdoor Education," Lecture at the University of Leicester, England, May 1995.